

IS THE QUR'ĀN TRANSLATABLE?

EARLY MUSLIM OPINION*

I

Every translation of the Qur'ān proclaims its own inadequacy. For it must necessarily include those verses which are clear in their emphasis that the Word of God was revealed to Muḥammad in the Arabic tongue. "Verily, We have made it an Arabic Qur'ān, haply ye will comprehend it."¹ Every translation in any language, classical or modern, foreign or Islamic, includes a score or so verses in different chapters which enshrine the same or similar pronouncement.² Their total import is that any translation, like any commentary in Arabic or in any other language, is no more than an approximation of the meaning of the Qur'ān, but not the Qur'ān itself.

Our examination of the subject starts from this point. We have to discuss questions at once historical, juristical, theological and rhetorical. Some of these questions were raised, in a preliminary form, even in the days of the Prophet and his immediate successors. But their formulation and development came with the jurists, traditionalists, commentators, theologians and philologists later on. As regards the days of the Prophet, there are certain reports of a historical nature which deserve to be considered first. But since some of them do not occur in the early sources, the historian who considers also their content may be tempted to question their authenticity.

The belief that the Qur'ān is a literal transcript of the Word of God from a safely preserved tablet (*lawḥ mahfūẓ*) in heaven revealed to Muḥammad in Arabic must be squared with the other belief that Muḥammad's mission is to mankind as a whole and not only to the Arabs. How in practice did the Prophet or his immediate successors face the problem—if or when they had to face it—of preaching the divine message to those non-Arabs who were unable to comprehend it in Arabic? Historically the problem did not become very pressing till the Muslim conquerors came in close contact with non-Arabs, notably Persians, after the death of Muḥammad.

There is, however, a report which raises the issue during his lifetime. Two versions of this report are available. The first is that some of the people of Persia asked Salmān al-Fārisī to write to them something of the Qur'ān, and he wrote to them the Fātiḥah in Persian.³

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¹ Sūrah XLIII, 3; az-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf* (ed. Lees *et al.*, Calcutta, 1856), II, 1320, comments that it was revealed in Arabic, not foreign, speech so that the Arabs could understand it.

² XII, 2; XIII, 37; XVI, 103; XIX, 97; XX, 113; XXVI, 192-195; XXXIX, 27-28; XLI, 3, 44; XLII, 6; XLVI, 12.

³ An-Nawawī, *Al-Majmūc*, (Cairo, Maṭba'at at-Taḏāmun, n.d.), 380.

The second version is that "the people of Persia wrote to Salmān al-Fārisī⁴ to write to them the Fātiḥah in Persian, which he did; and they used to recite it in prayer until their tongues became used to it."⁵ According to this second version Salmān "submitted what he had done to the Prophet, and he did not disapprove of it."⁶

Here are the two questions round which a major controversy arose in the early centuries of Islam: (a) Is it permissible to translate the Arabic Qur'ān into another tongue? (b) Is it lawful to recite the translated Qur'ān in prayer?

It is quite easy to find arguments against the authenticity of the Salmān report, particularly its second version. A historian will be quick to detect technical reasons, based both on internal as well as external evidence, to reject it altogether. Some jurists will not be far behind the historian in their protests. They may say that if, as it is claimed, the Prophet had approved reciting the Fātiḥah in Persian in prayer the problem is settled. But there is no reliable evidence that he did. Apart, however, from the question of reciting a translated Qur'ān in prayer, there seems nothing in the report, whether authentic or not, which does not agree with Muḥammad's known attitude to the *verbal* text of the revelation.

It is well-established that he settled a difference between two of his Companions as to the correct reading of the *Sūratu'l-Furqān* with characteristic flexibility and tolerance. 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb once challenged Hishām b. Ḥakīm's recital of this chapter, and the two appealed to the Prophet for a decision. "So it was revealed," was Muḥammad's verdict after hearing first Hishām and then 'Umar read his own version. Then Muḥammad made a pronouncement pregnant with meaning: "This Qur'ān has been revealed in seven dialects (*aḥruf*);⁷ recite it according to what is easier for you."⁸

⁴ Salmān was during the fourth/tenth century considered by some as a god. See al-Ash'ari, *Kitāb Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* (Istanbul, 1929-1933), I, 13.

⁵ لَمْ يَكُنْ أَسْنَنَهُمْ حَتَّى لَانَتْ أَلْسِنَتُهُمْ literally "became soft." Another version adds للمرية as if the use of Persian were merely a stepping-stone to the Arabic original.

⁶ *An-Nihāyah wa ad-Dirāyah* as quoted by ash-Shaikh Maḥmūd Abū Daqīqah in his article "Kalimah fī Tarjamat al-Qur'ān al-Karīm," *Nūr al-Islām*, III, 33-34. However, the authoritative as-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūṭ* (Cairo, 1324), I, 37 mentions only the first version, and does not include the claim that the Prophet was consulted.

⁷ Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Jāmi' al-Bayān* (Būlāq, 1323), I, 10 where further instances are cited and the dialects are reckoned as more than seven. Cf. as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān* (Cairo, 1360/1941), I, 230: "There are in the Qur'ān fifty dialects, those of Quraish, Hudhail...":

فِي الْقُرْآنِ مِنَ اللُّغَاتِ خَمْسُونَ لُغَةً : لُغَةُ قُرَيْشٍ وَهَذِيلٍ . . .

⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Būlāq, 1296), VI, 97; VIII, 201-202. This early "fluid" period was more or less terminated by the adoption of the 'Uthmānī text. That Caliph's directive to the compilers (see al-Bukhārī, VI, 94-95) was to adopt,

Was this authoritative sanction of variant readings, according to the prevailing tribal dialects of his time, to be extended to similar liberties with the text? In particular, was it a licence to deviate from the letter, if the spirit of the text was preserved? Aṭ-Ṭabarī makes it clear that the differences were in *tilāwah*, not in the *maʿānī*, in the letter, but not in the spirit of the text. That is also the opinion of ash-Shāfiʿī⁹ and others. A later commentator interprets the Prophet's pronouncement to suggest "the conveyance of the meaning through the use of synonyms," and adds that it was established that a number of the Companions used to recite the Qurʾān substituting synonyms for words which they could not recall, without authority.¹⁰ Among other Companions, Ibn Masʿūd is reputed to have gone even farther and to have read according to the meaning.¹¹

If variations of one kind or another in the Arabic text were practiced and allowed, was it, by analogy, a licence to translate the Arabic text into other languages? For the early pre-jurist period we have only some clues. When the Prophet wrote to the Byzantine Emperor in Arabic, he naturally expected his letter, containing as it does a verse from the Qurʾān, to be translated into Greek.¹² Ibn ʿAbbās relates from Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb¹³ that Heraclius called for an interpreter who read the Prophet's letter to him in Greek: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. From Muḥammad the servant of God and His Messenger to Hiraql. 'O ye People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him...'"¹⁴

Here is another analogy. Abū Hurairah relates that the People of the Book (which in this case means the Jews only) used to read the Torah in Hebrew and interpret it to the Muslims in Arabic, and that the Prophet did not disapprove. The command in the verse, "Say, Bring

in cases of doubt, the dialect of Quraish since "the Qurʾān was revealed in their dialect." The directive, however, seems to be at variance with the Qurʾān itself and Muḥammad's pronouncement quoted above. "Verily, We have made it an Arabic Qurʾān," was understood by commentators to cover all the dialects and not only that of Quraish. But as the dialect of the Prophet, the first revelations, or according to others most revelations, came down in it and to a lesser degree in the other dialects. Cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī* (Cairo, 1438), IX, 7, 19-21.

⁹ *Kitāb al-Umm* (Bulāq, 1321-1325), VII, 63.

¹⁰ Ibn Ḥajar, IX, 21-22: له انه كان يقرأ بالمرادف ولم يكن مسموعاً له

¹¹ This is very strongly denied by Ibn al-Jazārī, *Kitāb an-Nashr fi'l Qirʾān al-ʿAshr* (Damascus, 1345), I, 31.

¹² Al-Bukhārī, III, 215; cf. Ibn Ḥajar, VI, 81:

استنبطه من كونه كتب اليهم بعض القرآن بالعربية

وكانه سألهم على تعليمه إذ لا يقرأونه حتى يترجم لهم

¹³ Al-Bukhārī, VIII, 200; Ibn Ḥajar, XIII, 442.

¹⁴ Sūrah III, 63. With only slight variations, the English translation used here is that of A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1955).

the Torah and read it if ye are truthful,"¹⁵ was addressed to the Jews when they submitted a man and a woman of their community, who had committed adultery, to the Prophet to deal with them. The Prophet inquired what was the punishment prescribed in the Torah. This verse is the subject of a *bāb* in al-Bukhārī on whether it is lawful to translate the Torah and other sacred books into Arabic and other languages.¹⁶ Ibn Ḥajar¹⁷ comments that since the Torah was in Hebrew, and God commanded that it be read to Arabs who knew no Hebrew, this was an authority to express it in Arabic. To him the converse is also permissible: "to express what is in Arabic in Hebrew." The context suggests that the author had the Qur'ān in mind.

II

Such fine points of interpretation are the product of a later age. It was Abū Ḥanīfah (b. about 81 A.H.) who started a new and more serious controversy by his declaration that it was permissible to recite the Qur'ān in Persian in prayer, whether the reader knew Arabic or not. His followers extended this permission to Turkish, Hindi, Syriac, Hebrew and other languages of the non-Arabs.¹⁸ To interpret the Qur'ān in its own language, or in any other, was from the days of the Prophet up to the days of Abū Ḥanīfah generally allowed and widely practiced. This is a safe inference not only from the injunction of the Qur'ān itself,¹⁹ but also from the increasing number of non-Arabs, with different racial and linguistic backgrounds, who embraced Islam.²⁰

Abū Ḥanīfah's Persian origin cannot alone be the explanation of his daring opinion. It seems that genuine religious concern and practical considerations combined to shape his opinions. Let us not overlook the fact that he did not pronounce on the translation of the Qur'ān as a whole; he merely tried to solve an obvious difficulty of non-Arab believers who were required to recite in prayer certain short chapters or verses only.²¹ Unfortunately Abū Ḥanīfah's opinion on this matter, and indeed on other matters, is known only through the gloss of his followers.²² But neither of his two chief disciples, Abū Yūsuf and

¹⁵ Sūrah III, 92.

¹⁶ *Aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥ*, VIII, 150, 200.

¹⁷ *Fath al-Bārī*, XIII, 442.

¹⁸ Cf. Nasafī, *Kanz ad-Daqa'iq* (Dihli, 1309), I, 53.

¹⁹ Cf. Sūrah V, 71: "O Messenger, deliver that which has been sent down to thee from thy Lord." Cf. Sūrah XVI, 46, 60.

²⁰ Cf. contemporary practice of teachers of the Qur'ān to the Berbers in Morocco, a practice which has been handed down from generation to generation since early times: the meaning is first explained in local dialect, and then the Arabic text is taught. Memorizing the Arabic is not required before the meaning has been explained. *Majallat al-Azhar*, VII, No. 3, 192.

²¹ It is related that al-Ḥabīb al-ʿAjamī, an associate of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (b. 21 A.H.) used to recite the Qur'ān in Persian in prayer "owing to speech difficulty in Arabic": لعدم انطلاق لسانه باللغة العربية.

²² In the *fiqh* books, chiefly under the subject of prayer (see next note), but

ash-Shaibānī, went as far as their master whose licence was unconditional.²³ They both made the permission to recite the translated Qurʾān in prayer conditional on the inability to recite it in Arabic.²⁴ Since prayer was communion with God—so the Ḥanafī argument goes—it was lawful either through God's Word for those able to recite it in the original, or through the translated meaning for those unable to do so, since "obligation is according to ability."²⁵

But whether absolute or conditional, the permission implies that the Qurʾān is simply the meaning of the revealed Arabic text, and this does not change if cast in different linguistic molds. The general orthodox doctrine that the Arabic Qurʾān is the literal word of God is thus very much challenged. The Ḥanafī school is alone in Islam in this matter. Later jurists of this school made much of the story of Salmān, though not of the alleged approval of the Prophet. Further, they showed remarkable ingenuity in finding support for their views in the Qurʾān itself. They pointed out the verse, "Verily, it is in the (sacred) books of the ancient."²⁶ One of the interpretations of this verse is that the "meaning" of the Qurʾān is in those sacred books.²⁷ Another verse quoted in support of the Ḥanafī school is "Verily, it is in the ancient books, the books of Ibrāhīm and Mūsā."²⁸ Az-Zamakhsharī says this also refers to the meaning of the Qurʾān.²⁹

The Ḥanafī viewpoint seems to have alerted, and even hardened, other orthodox opinion on the question of translation in general. It is often claimed that Abū Ḥanīfah abandoned his original unconditional permission, and that in the end he accepted the opinion of his two chief disciples in permitting the use of translation only for those unable to recite the original Arabic.³⁰

not as a rule in other works. Thus *bāb aṣ-ṣalat* in al-Khawārizmī, *Jāmiʿ Masānīd al-Imām al-Aʿṣam* (Hyderabad, 1332), I, 293 ff. prescribes the recital of the *Fātiḥah* in prayer, but contains nothing about the permission to recite it in Persian or other languages.

²³ Some of Abū Ḥanīfah's followers even said that he approved reading something of the Torah, the Gospel or the Psalms in prayer provided the reader was certain it was not corrupted (*muḥarraf*). See al-Kashānī, *Badāʾiʿ aṣ-Ṣanāʾiʿ* (Cairo, 1327) I, 113.

²⁴ Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūṭ*, 37.

²⁵ التكليف بحسب الوسع

²⁶ Sūrah XXVI, 196.

²⁷ *Al-Kashshāf*, II, 1009; al-Baiḍāwī, *Anwār at-Tanzīl* (Leipzig, 1848), II, 60.

²⁸ Sūrah LXXXVII, 18-19. ²⁹ Cf. al-Baiḍāwī, II, 399.

³⁰ As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, I, 188. This claim is sometimes based on the authority of Abū Bakr ar-Rāzi, sometimes on that of Nūḥ b. Mariam, and sometimes on that of ʿAlī b. al-Jaʿd. But is not mentioned by Sarakhsī in his authoritative book *al-Mabsūṭ* which, in thirty volumes, expounds the Ḥanafī *fiqh* as related by ash-Shaibānī from Abū Ḥanīfah. It is, however, mentioned in a later Ḥanafī source. See al-Marghanīnī, *al-Hidāyah fi'l Furūʿ* (Lucknow, 1302), I, 86: ويروى رجوعه في أصل المسألة إلى قولهما The alleged recantation of Abū Ḥanīfah seems to be the basis for the statement in Nöldeke-Schwally *et al.*, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (Leipzig, 1909-1938), III, 112 that the approval of reading the Qurʾān in Persian was "one of the archaic bents in his teaching: "einer der archaischen Züge in seiner Lehre."

sent with a message in his own people's tongue to the exclusion of the tongues of the non-Arabs "is clear in more than one place in God's book."

A later commentator adopts the same argument, though he draws a different conclusion. "If you argue that the Messenger of God was not sent to the Arabs alone," he says, "but to all mankind ... who speak different languages, so that if the Arabs could not make any plea (of ignorance) others could, then I would say this: Either (the revelation) could have been sent in all the tongues or in one of them. But there was no need for it to be revealed in all languages, since translation (*tarjamah*) makes up for that ... It remains for it to be revealed in one tongue, and the worthiest was, of course, that of the people of the Messenger ... who, once they comprehended (the revelation) from him, would transmit it and spread it, with translations (*tarājīm*) to explain it as it is witnessed in the use of substitute translations by the non-Arab nations..."³⁵

The term *tarjamah* may here be taken in the strict sense of "translation," or in the loose sense of explanation. In either case the general sense is that, after the death of the Prophet, the duty of *tabligh*, or preaching his message, was passed on to the Companions and their followers and indeed the Arab-Muslim community as a whole.³⁶ To perform this duty, it was increasingly necessary to expound the Qurʾān to foreigners who knew no Arabic, or even to Arabs with imperfect command of the language. There is little doubt that the process was for a long time an oral one, and that the "expounded" or "translated" parts were an occasional chapter or occasional verses required for professing the articles of faith, performing the daily prayers and understanding what is lawful and what is forbidden.

But soon jurists and theologians came with their arguments. The question of explaining the Qurʾān, whether as *tafsīr* or as *tarjamah*, was bound with their definition of belief in the sense of professing the oneness of God or embracing Islam. Ibn Ḥazm very neatly summarizes the different views.³⁷ Jurists, traditionalists, al-Muʿtazilah, ash-Shīʿah and al-Khawārij all agree that belief is "knowledge through the heart, profession through the tongue, and action through the members of the body." The Ḥanafī school, however, does not consider "action" as a constituent element of faith, and bases its arguments, according to Ibn Ḥazm, wholly on *linguistic* grounds:³⁸ The Qurʾān was revealed in Arabic and God and His Messenger addressed mankind in Arabic, and in that language "action" does not mean belief. If they are quoted correctly, the followers of the Ḥanafī school seem to claim

³⁵ Az-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 1697.

³⁶ For a commentary on one of the verses on this subject see al-Bukhārī, VIII, 196, and Ibn Ḥajar, XIII, 430.

³⁷ *Kitāb al-Fiṣal* (Cairo, 1317), III, 188-190.

³⁸ Cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* (ed. Ḥammūdah Ghurābah, Cairo, 1955), 123.

Even in this revised guise the idea was, to the jurists of other schools, too extreme. In positive terms the Qur'ān proclaims loudly enough that it was revealed in Arabic; in negative terms, it equally strongly proclaims that it was not God's intention to reveal it in any but the Arabic tongue. "Verily, if we had made it a foreign Qur'ān, they would have said 'Why, its signs are not clear? What! a foreign (book) and an Arabian (prophet)?'" ³¹ According to the Mālikī commentator, al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī, this verse alone invalidates Abū Ḥanīfah's opinion.

In their care to safeguard against the use of translations in prayer, the jurists of the other schools hedge their approval of translation for other purposes with reservations that sometimes amount almost to prohibition. ³²

To the jurists, commentators, theologians and others of the classical period, the question of translation touched fundamental beliefs, which include the belief in the universal character of Muḥammad's mission and the belief that the Qur'ān is both eternal and inimitable.

It is safe to assume that the Prophet conveyed his message through his own tongue. Those non-Arabs with whom he had contact appear to have been sufficiently Arabic-speaking to understand the message. According to the Qur'ān itself this was God's design. "And We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his own people, that he might make all clear to them." ³³ The usual commentary on this verse is that the people, with a prophet preaching in their own tongue, could have no plea (*ḥujjah*) against God that they were unable to understand the message. Ash-Shāfi'ī explains the difficulty, in the case of Muḥammad, of a divine message in the Arabic tongue addressed to non-Arabs as well as to Arabs as follows. ³⁴ There were two possibilities: either he was sent with a message in his people's tongue, in which case it was incumbent on the rest of mankind to learn that tongue or what they were capable of learning of it, or he was sent with the message in their different tongues. The proof, says ash-Shāfi'ī, that Muḥammad was

³¹ *Sūrah* XLI, 44; see *al-Kashshāf*, II, 1290 on "a foreign (book) sent to an Arabian (people)?"

³² This paper is not concerned with modern times, but suffice it to recall here that in the 1920's the *ʿulamāʾ* in Egypt and Syria were so vehement in their denunciation of Turkish and English translations that in consequence copies of the translations were confiscated and their circulation prohibited. For a summary of the point of view of the *ʿulamāʾ* see ash-Shaikh Muḥammad Shākir's article as translated by Sir T. W. Arnold (*The Moslem World*, XVI, 161-165) which brands the translators as "heretics." Such strong reaction was to a great extent provoked by the extreme secular measures taken by the Turkish Republic. Thus ash-Shaikh Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā was most uncompromising in condemning these measures and also the Turkish translation of the Qur'ān. See *Tafsīr al-Manār* (Cairo, 1347/1928), IX, 314 ff. Muḥammad Farīd Wajīdī, however, pointed out that it was permissible to translate the meaning (*maʿānī*) of the Qur'ān. Cf. *Nūr al-Islām*, III, 59; H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago, 1947), 131, n. 1.

³³ *Sūrah* XIV, 4.

³⁴ *Kitāb ar-Risālah fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Būlāq, 1321), 9.

having it both ways: God made the Qur'ān Arabic; but man may make it Persian.³⁹

III

As to the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān, it is our view that it derives added significance from emotional factors which are at once religious and national. They are bound up with the Arab's pride in his faith⁴⁰ and his love of his language. Not only is Islam superior to any religion, but the Arabic language is peerless. The union between the two objects of pride and love is achieved in the Qur'ān which is thus venerated alike as a sacred book and as a unique literary classic, so much so that non-Arab Muslims who rose to become authorities in exegesis, tradition, jurisprudence and philology,⁴¹ did not contribute less, rather more, than the native Arabs in shaping Muslim opinion on the double role of the Qur'ān.

The roots of the doctrine of *i'jāz* are, of course, in the revelation. Its essence is the failure of the Arabs to answer the challenge of producing even one chapter equal to the Qur'ān in the excellency of its literary composition, thereby establishing Muḥammad's claim that the Qur'ān was a divine revelation, not a human composition.⁴² "If they do not answer your challenge, then know that it has been sent down with God's knowledge." The doctrine of inimitability itself is a subject of controversy. Is it the literary style and composition that is *mu'jiz*? Or is it also the meaning, the contents and certain forecasts of the future? Is the challenge to be taken as addressed to the Arabs alone, or to others as well?⁴³ These questions do not concern us

³⁹ Cf. as-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūt*, I, 37: "The Qur'ān is God's Word, not created and not new. Inasmuch as all languages are new, it is not valid to say that it is a Qur'ān in a particular language, since God says 'Verily, it is in the (sacred) books of the ancients,' and it was thus in their tongue."

⁴⁰ Cf. *Sūrah*, III, 106: "You are the best *ummah* ever brought forth unto men, bidding to honour, and forbidding dishonour, and believing in God..." *Ummah* is here untranslatable; it means more "religion" than "nation" or "community." Cf. Ibn Qutaibah, *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān* (ed. as-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr, Cairo, 1373/1954), 345-346 on the interpretation of *Sūrah* II, 213 and *Sūrah* XXII, 23:

أصل الأمة الصنف من الناس . . . يقال للقوم يجتمعون على دين واحد أمة

⁴¹ Thus Abū 'Ubaydah Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā, who was of Persian Jewish origin and became an authority on rare vocabulary, is quoted as saying: "Whoever alleges that there is in the Qur'ān anything other than the Arabic tongue has greatly exceeded the limits." Cf. as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, I, 231:

أبو عبيدة : من زعم ان فيه غير العربية فقد أعظم القول

⁴² *Sūrah* II, 23; X, 38; XI, 14. See az-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 51-54; 584; 605-606.

⁴³ Cf. *Sūrah* XVII, 88; cf. al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb Uṣūl ad-Dīn* (Istanbul, 1346/1928), 183-184; al-Juwainī, *Kitāb al-Irshād* (ed. J.-D. Luciani, Paris, 1938), 201-203; ash-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb Nihāyat al-Iqdām* (ed. A. Guillaume, Oxford, 1934), 447-448.

here; ⁴⁴ we are primarily concerned with the inimitability in relation to the question of translation.

Jurists have defined the Qurʾān as the Word of God revealed to Muḥammad in the Arabic language for instruction (*tablīgh*) and challenge (*iʿjāz*), and which was transmitted down from generation to generation, and is established between the two covers of the *muṣḥaf*. It is clear from this composite definition that the challenge of inimitability has been woven into the essential fabric of orthodox Muslim beliefs. All the orthodox objections to translation spring logically from this fact. To all except the Ḥanafī school, the revelation ceases to be the Word of God and loses its character as the Qurʾān if translated from Arabic into any language. To fortify this purely doctrinal viewpoint, amply justified by the Qurʾān itself, the superiority of the Arabic language was brought into the argument. The voice of tradition—again with the exception of the Ḥanafī school—is unanimous in declaring that it is virtually impossible to translate Arabic into any language, still less to translate the Arabic of the Qurʾān. ⁴⁵

A few examples will suffice. As a pure Arab who is distantly related to the Prophet, ash-Shāfiʿī (b. 150 A.H.) is perhaps foremost among those who uphold the supremacy of the Arabic language on religious grounds. "No human being," he declared, "unless he is a prophet, can be a complete master of it." ⁴⁶ In the same way that the followers of other religions are called upon to accept Islam, so they are called upon to accept the Arabic language with it. "Every Muslim," he writes, "must learn of the Arabic language to the utmost of his capacity, so that he may be able, through it, to witness that there is no God but Allāh ... and that Muḥammad is His servant and Messenger, to recite the Book of God, and to utter the *takbir*, *tasbiḥ*, *tashahhud*... He who learns more of this language, made by God the language of the Seal of Prophets and the medium through which was revealed His last Book, would gain an (added) advantage ..." ⁴⁷

The philologist Ibn Qutaibah (b. 213 A.H.), despite his Persian descent, asserts that the Arabic language is unique among the languages of other nations and superior to them all, precisely by the characteristics which distinguish the language of the Qurʾān. "Hence," he writes, "no translator is able to put it into any (other) language, in a manner similar to the translation of the Gospel from Syriac into Ethiopic and Greek, and similar also to the translation of the Torah and Psalms

⁴⁴ For details see at-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, I, 4-5; al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (ed. as-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr, Cairo, 1374/1954), 18, 399. Cf. as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, II, 197-211.

⁴⁵ Al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (ed. ʿAbd as-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, Cairo, 1357), I, 74-77, maintains that it is impossible to translate Arabic poetry, and that translating material dealing with religion and the Qurʾān had better not be attempted at all.

⁴⁶ *Kitāb ar-Risālah fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, 8-9.

⁴⁷ There is a new edition of *Kitāb ar-Risālah* (Cairo, 1358/1940) by Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir. The quotations above occur on pp. 40-48.

and all God's Books into Arabic, for (the languages of) the non-Arabs are not as rich as that of the Arabs in metaphor." ⁴⁸

Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā' (second half of the fourth century A.H.), with their philosophic bent and the mixed racial origin of some of their leading members, might have been expected to be in line with Abū Ḥanīfah rather than with ash-Shāfi'ī. But they are just as emphatic in affirming that Arabic represented the perfection of human speech (*tamām al-lughah al-insāniyyah*), and that accordingly God revealed the Qur'ān in it. They envisage the victory of Islam over all other religions and its language over all other languages "because the Qur'ān is the noblest Book revealed by God ... and no one of all the nations, with their different languages, is able to translate it from the Arabic into any other language ..." ⁴⁹

Al-Ghazālī (b. 450 A.H.), in his treatise on the attributes of God, ⁵⁰ advances a theological argument that may well be taken to mean that the Qur'ān is not translatable, or even must not be translated by a Muslim. Believers, he insists, must abstain from making any change in the Arabic wording of what has been transmitted to them, or translating its meaning into Persian or Turkish. ⁵¹ He definitely considers it unlawful to relate any material except in the authentic original, "for some of the Arabic words have no equivalent Persian words, and some have equivalents, but the Persians are not accustomed to use them metaphorically as the Arabs do ..." To the mind of al-Ghazālī, the danger from change of wording or translation affects the divine attributes, a danger which must be avoided by strict adherence to the Arabic. ⁵²

That is a fair representation of the general orthodox view up to the fifth century of the Muslim era. The outlines of the Ḥanafī view have already been drawn in the previous pages. Suffice it now to quote its formulation in some detail by ash-Shaibānī, Abū Ḥanīfah's disciple, in connection with prayer and the call to it. "The Arabic language," he is reported to have said, "has a virtue which is denied to other languages." ⁵³ He allowed substituting an Arabic synonym for another in *takbīr*, but, unlike his master, did not allow Persian substitutes. He allowed reciting the Qur'ān in prayer in Persian only to those unable to recite it in Arabic. In his view, the Qur'ān is a challenge to all

⁴⁸ *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Rasā'il Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'* (Cairo, 1347/1928), III, 152, 154, 171, 353, 357.

⁵⁰ *Ijām al-ʿAwāmm* (Cairo, 1350/1932), 3, 8-10.

⁵¹ The following sentence in quotation may suggest that the words "or Turkish" are interpolation.

⁵² Al-Ghazālī is thus indirectly upholding the contention of Abū ʿUбайдah, ash-Shāfi'ī and others that there is nothing but Arabic in the Qur'ān. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, I, 7, explains that it is a mere coincidence that there are words in the Qur'ān which resemble others in Persian, Ethiopic and other languages. As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, I, 231, gives a less emphatic explanation: these words were long naturalized into Arabic and recognized as pure (*faṣīḥ*), native words. Cf. A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda, 1938), 5.

⁵³ As-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūṭ*, I, 36-37.

mankind in its meaning (*fi'l-ma'nā*)⁵⁴ "and the inability of the Persians to produce anything like it can only be apparent in their own tongue."⁵⁵

IV

Nothing of substance has been added to the views of either side to the controversy after the fifth century. But both sides seem to be equally vague on one important point. They both make claims, whether extreme or mild, regarding the superiority of the Arabic language, and this naturally raises the question of the linguistic qualifications of the authorities cited above. Were they, and others like them, sufficiently acquainted with the languages of the non-Arabs to pronounce on the superiority of Arabic to all of these languages? With the possible exception of Persian, there is little reason to assume profound linguistic knowledge. But they all seem to have been so charmed by the undoubted versatility of Arabic, which reached its climax in the Qur'ān, that they took the matter for granted and gave little or no evidence in support of their assertions.⁵⁶

There is no need either to labour this point or to proceed with the history of the controversy as a whole beyond this stage. But one of the later jurists deserves brief notice, if only because of his influence in this matter on the contemporary authorities of al-Azhar. He is the Mālikite ash-Shāṭibī who died in Granada in 790 A.H. The first editor of that institution's journal, a former rector and the present rector, all begin their respective articles on the subject of the translation of the Qur'ān with ash-Shāṭibī's dicta.⁵⁷ None of them tried to investigate the roots of the question in the early centuries of Islam, and what the one says reads as an amplification or reproduction of the material of the other, thrown together with little or no respect for chronological order.

Ash-Shāṭibī's much quoted passage⁵⁸ is a mere ordering, in a logical form, of what others had already said rather loosely: Arabic words,

⁵⁴ In the same source (p. 37) both Abū Yūsuf and ash-Shaibānī are quoted as declaring that the challenge was both in composition (*naẓm*) and meaning (*ma'nā*). Ibn Taimiyyah adds a third, namely, the vocabulary or pronunciation (*lafẓ*); see *Kitāb Bughyat al-Murtād* or *ar-Risālah as-Sab'iniyyah* in *Majmū'at Fatāwā* (Kurdistan Press, Cairo, 1329), V, 145:

القرآن معجز بلفظه ونظمه ومعناه

⁵⁵ Cf. al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, 393:

ان الاعجمي لا يمكنه أن يعلم إعجازه إلا استدلالاً

⁵⁶ Cf. *Rasā'il Ikhwān as-Ṣafā'*, III, 152, where some knowledge of Syriac, Hebrew, Greek (*yūndniyyah*) and Latin (*rūmiyyah*) is claimed by the writers.

⁵⁷ Ash-Shaikh Muḥammad al-Khiḍr Ḥusain, ash-Shaikh Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, and ash-Shaikh Maḥmūd Shaltūt respectively. See *Nūr al-Islām* (later *Majallat al-Azhar*), II (1350 A.H.), 122-132; VII, 77-112; VII, 123-134.

⁵⁸ *Al-Muwāfaqāt* (ed. ash-Shaikh 'Abdullah Dirāz, Cairo, n.d.), II, 66-68.

on their own or arranged in literary form to make sense, may be considered from two aspects—either they convey absolute meanings (*maʿānin muṭlaqah*) or auxiliary meanings (*maʿānin khādimah*). The first is common to all languages, so that it is possible to express in foreign languages what is expressed in Arabic and vice versa. The second, derived from highly developed rhetoric, is peculiar to Arabic. “If this (second view) is admitted,” he writes, “it is not possible to translate, in any way, Arabic into foreign tongues, still less to translate the Qurʾān, unless the two languages concerned be proved equal ..., a very difficult thing to do conclusively ...” On the other hand it is possible to translate the Qurʾān, if the absolute meaning alone is considered, since by common agreement it is permissible to comment on it, and this agreement on its *tafsīr* was an argument for the legitimacy of its *tarjamah*.

The difference between commenting and translating is, of course, very great, and the analogy was attacked by the followers of ash-Shāfiʿī as a false one. This is best expressed in the words of al-Qaffāl who was asked, when he maintained that the Qurʾān in Persian was unimaginable, “Do you say, then, that no one can comment on the Qurʾān?” He did not admit that the analogy was valid, and said: “In *tafsīr*, it is possible to capture the meaning of some of God’s words and to miss the meaning of others; in *tarjamah*, which is replacing one word for another, it is not possible to convey all the meaning of God’s words.”⁵⁹ This is not as sophistical as it seems; what it means is that in the former case the original divine text is preserved in Arabic; in the latter it is replaced by a translation. No jurist has allowed reading a *tafsīr* in prayers; but the Ḥanafī school allowed reading a *tarjamah*.

That was precisely the main objection to translation: that it might be used in prayer, and might be imagined as the inspired Qurʾān, which is to all, except the Ḥanafī school, a manifest error. There is little evidence that the views of this school gained universal acceptance even among its adherents. Recital of the Qurʾān in Persian in prayer remained, on the whole, a theoretical licence. In practice, however, partial or full translations of the Qurʾān were attempted. The available manuscripts of such translations are not old,⁶⁰ so it is difficult to establish when translations were first attempted.

But it is now necessary to distinguish between licence to “recite” and licence to “write.” To recite from memory a translation of a short chapter in prayer is one thing, and to possess a written translation of the whole Qurʾān is quite another. For this raised another question: can

⁵⁹ As quoted by Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, I, 188.

⁶⁰ See for example, Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1879), I, 6-8. Cf. *Hand List of Persian MSS in the British Museum*, 1895-1934, 79. See in particular Add. 5548-551 (assigned to the fourteenth century) and OR. 1340 (assigned to the sixteenth century).

the Qurʾān be written down in letters other than the Arabic characters? ⁶¹

Apart from the scholastic argument whether the Arabic letters were, like the Qurʾān itself, eternal or created, ⁶² there were practical orthographical difficulties. As some of the Arabic letters have no exact counterparts in other languages, it was feared that this would lead to mispronunciation, and this in turn to misunderstanding of the holy text. The Ḥanafī school permitted the writing down of a translation only if accompanied by the Arabic original, some sort of equal translation (*tarjamah musāwīyah*), word for word. This is the origin of the practice of the interlineal translations in most of the available manuscripts where every line of the Arabic is followed by its equivalent in Persian. When in due course other Muslims produced translations of the Qurʾān in their own native tongues, or even in foreign languages, this pattern was followed with or without variation.

Consideration of these translations, however, is beyond the scope of this paper which seeks to elucidate the question up to the fifth century only. Those interested in its later history will find its substance in the numerous works of *shurūḥ* and *furūḥ*, stated and restated by both sides, often in the same or similar words, but with few or no new ideas.

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⁶¹ This question is, of course, bound up with the larger question of خلق القرآن whether the Qurʾān is created or eternal. For a short and clear statement see al-Ghazālī, *Iljām*, 36-37. See further al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibānah ʿan Uṣūl ad-Dīyānah* (Cairo, 1348), 20 ff; al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb at-Tamhīd* (Beirut, 1957), 237 ff. Cf. *Rasāʾil Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ*, IV, 51-52.

⁶² For the Ḥanafī viewpoint see al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar* (Hyderabad, 1321), 23:

الحروف والهاء ... والصوت كلها مخلوقة